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ABSTRACT

This digest describes ways in which professionals who work with culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities can create an educational climate that accepts and respects the language and culture of its students and empowers them to feel confident enough to risk getting involved in the learning process. Methods of creating such an educational climate include: (1) incorporating minority students' language and culture into the school program; (2) encouraging minority community participation as an integral component of children's education; (3) allowing students to become active generators of their own knowledge; and (4) using an advocacy orientation in the assessment process. (11 references) (JDD)

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EMPOWERING CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS

Jim Cummins

A positive attitude and a positive self-concept are necessary ingredients for achieving maximum learning potential. A program that accepts and respects the language and culture of its students empowers them to feel confident enough to risk getting involved in the learning process, which includes making mistakes. This digest describes ways in which professionals who work with culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities can create such an educational climate.

Incorporate minority students' language and culture into the school program.

The extent to which their language and culture are incorporated into the school program is significantly related to students' academic success (Campos & Keatinge, 1988; Cummins, 1984, 1989; Willig, 1985). In programs in which minority students' first-language skills are strongly reinforced, the students tend to be more successful. Students' English skills do not suffer as a result of less English instruction because there is considerable transfer of cognitive and academic skills across languages. Thus, students who have learned to read in Spanish in a bilingual program do not have to learn to read all over again when instruction begins in English (Ada, 1988). Educators who see their role as adding a second language and cultural affiliation to students' repertoires are likely to empower them more than those who see their role as replacing or subtracting students' primary language and culture in the process of fostering their assimilation into the dominant culture.

The following is a list of ways schools can create a climate that is welcoming to minority families and, at the same time, promotes childrens' pride in their linguistic talents (New Zealand Department of Education, 1988, p. 14):

- Reflect the various cultural groups in the school district by providing signs in the main office and elsewhere that welcome people in the different languages of the community.
- Encourage students to use their first language around the school.
- Provide opportunities for students from the same ethnic group to communicate with one another in their first language where possible (e.g., in cooperative learning groups on at least some occasions).
- Recruit people who can tutor students in their first language.
- Provide books written in the various languages in classrooms and the school library.
- Incorporate greetings and information in the various languages in newsletters and other official school communications.
- Provide bilingual and/or multilingual signs.
- Display pictures and objects of the various cultures represented at the school.
- Create units of work that incorporate other languages in addition to the school language.
- Encourage students to write contributions in their first language for school newspapers and magazines.
- Provide opportunities for students to study their first language in elective subjects and/or in extracurricular clubs.
- Encourage parents to help in the classroom, library, playground, and in clubs.
- Invite students to use their first language during assemblies, prizegivings, and other official functions.
- Invite people from minority groups to act as resource people and to speak to students in both formal and informal settings.

Encourage minority community participation as an integral component of children's education.

When educators involve parents from minority groups as partners in their children's education, the parents appear to develop a sense of efficacy that communicates itself to their children and has positive academic consequences. Most parents of children from minority groups have high academic aspirations for their children and want to be involved in promoting their academic progress (Wong Fillmore, 1983). However, they often do not know how to help their children academically, and they are excluded from participation by the school. Dramatic changes in children's school progress can be realized when educators take the initiative to change this exclusionary pattern to one of collaboration. A collaborative orientation may require a willingness on the part of the teacher to work closely with teachers or aides proficient in the mother tongue in order to communicate effectively and in a noncondescending way with parents from minority groups (Ada, 1988).

Allow students to become active generators of their own knowledge.

There are two major orientations in pedagogy: the transmission model and the interactive/experiential model. These differ in the extent to which the teacher retains exclusive control over classroom interaction as opposed to sharing some of this control with students. The basic premise of the transmission model is that the teacher's task is to impart knowledge or skills to students who do not yet have these skills. This implies that the teacher initiates and controls the interaction, constantly orienting it toward the achievement of instructional objectives.

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A central tenet of the interactive/experiential model is that "talking and writing are means to learning" (Bullock Report, 1975, p. 50). Its major characteristics, as compared to a transmission model, are as follows:

- Genuine dialogue between student and teacher in both oral and written modalities.
- Guidance and facilitation rather than control of student learning by the teacher.
- Encouragement of student-student talk in a collaborative learning context.
- Encouragement of meaningful language use by students rather than correctness of surface forms.
- Conscious integration of language use and development with all curricular content rather than teaching language and other content as isolated subjects.
- A focus on developing higher level cognitive skills rather than factual recall.
- Task presentation that generates intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation.
- Student involvement in curriculum planning, teaching students to understand learning styles.

In short, pedagogical approaches that empower students encourage them to assume greater control over setting their own learning goals and collaborate actively with each other in achieving these goals. The instruction is automatically "culture-fair" in that all students are actively involved in expressing, sharing, and amplifying their experiences within the classroom. Recent research on effective teaching strategies for bilingual students with disabilities supports the adoption of interactive/experiential models of pedagogy (Swedo, 1987; Willig, Swedo, & Ortiz, 1987).

Use an advocacy orientation in the assessment process.

Recent studies suggest that despite the appearance of change brought about by legislation such as Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, psychologists continue to test children until they "find" the disability that could be invoked to "explain" the student's apparent academic difficulties (Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986). What is required to reverse the so-called legitimizing function of assessment can be termed an *advocacy* orientation. To challenge the labeling of students from minority groups as disabled, assessment must focus on (a) the extent to which children's language and culture are incorporated into the school program, (b) the extent to which educators collaborate with parents in a shared enterprise, and (c) the extent to which children are encouraged to use both their first and second languages actively in the classroom to amplify their experiences in interaction with other children and adults. It is essential that assessment go beyond psychoeducational considerations and take into account the child's entire learning environment.

In summary, an advocacy approach to assessment of children from minority groups involves identifying the pathology that exists in the power relations between dominant and dominated groups in society, in the reflection of these power relations in the interactions of schools and communities, and in the mental and cultural disabling of students from minority groups that takes place in classrooms.

The major goal of the intervention model discussed here is to *prevent* academic casualties among students from minority groups. The principles of empowerment pedagogy are equally applicable to all programs for students from minority groups, regardless of whether they are designated bilingual education, bilingual special education, or some other form of program. In fact, students from minority groups who are experiencing learning difficulties and have been referred for special education have a particular need for empowerment pedagogy and can benefit considerably from such approaches (Swedo, 1987).

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